



Tips for Providing Free Choice Mineral Supplements to Goats

By Jackie Nix

Any long time goat producer can attest to the fact that goats are unique creatures. They exhibit unique behaviors quite unlike any other type of livestock. This is especially true when referring to feeding behaviors. One of the most frequently asked questions that I encounter is “How do I get my goats to consistently eat minerals?” Many goat producers face difficulty in getting their goats to consume proper amounts of mineral supplements. The good news is that this problem is usually alleviated with a few simple management tips.

1. Keep mineral supplements clean and reasonably free of dirt and manure.

Goats are very finicky eaters and will avoid contaminated or dirty feed or supplements. This is a natural adaptation to help keep them parasite free. Goat producers who provide loose minerals for goats in an open pan, feed trough or cattle mineral feeder often face consumption problems as the minerals are easily soiled. An ideal solution is to replace these with PVC mineral feeders (see Figures 1 and 2). This PVC mineral feeder, constructed out of ordinary 3-inch diameter PVC pipe, effectively keeps minerals clean and relatively dry. For producers using blocks, keep blocks out of mud or other wet areas. If necessary, place blocks on raised structures like commercial block holders, cinder blocks or tree stumps to achieve this.

2. Give goats convenient access to mineral supplements.

Mineral supplements must be consumed at recommended levels in order to provide the advertised benefits. Therefore it makes no sense to make goats compete for minerals. Be sure to provide an adequate number of mineral feeders and/or blocks to reduce competition. I generally recommend 1 block or mineral feeder per 10 head of goats but this recommendation may vary among products (be sure to read the manufacturers directions for use). Generally, place mineral feeders or blocks a minimum of 10 feet apart. This allows all goats, no matter their status in the pecking order, the opportunity to access mineral supplements. Also, place mineral supplements in areas that goats frequent. This is typically within 50 feet of a water source, loafing area, or feeding area; however, situations may vary from farm to farm. Be sure to avoid making animals travel excessively in order to receive the mineral supplementation they need.

3. Remove access to other free choice sources of salt.

Goats, like all mammals, crave salt. They will consume more salt than they actually need for nutritional purposes. Salt is used in mineral mixes as an attractant. If goats have more than one source of free choice salt to choose from, they may choose the *wrong* source of salt that isn't providing them a balanced source of nutrients (many essential minerals taste bitter). For these reasons it is VERY IMPORTANT to provide only ONE free choice source of salt in the form of a *complete* mineral supplement at any one time. Therefore, remove all white, yellow and trace mineral salt blocks because these high-salt blocks will interfere with proper consumption of a complete mineral and vitamin supplement.

4. Follow label directions.

NEVER mix a commercial free choice mineral with any outside ingredients (i.e. more salt, molasses, pelleted feed, etc.) unless directed to do so by the label feeding instructions. Mixing only serves to dilute the minerals and vitamins provided. Thus your goats don't get the full benefit of the supplement, resulting in wasted money on your part. Always use a commercial product in the way that it is recommended to be used on the product label.

5. Monitor consumption.

Determine consumption rate per head per day (after a period of acclimation of 1 to 2 weeks if the supplement is new to the goats). You can monitor consumption by determining the amount of supplement consumed in one month (i.e. number of blocks or bags) and then multiply this number by the weight of the blocks or bags (For example 4 bags @ 25 lb each = 100 lbs). Divide this figure by 30 days to determine the consumption per day (100 lb/30 days = 3.33 lb/day). Next, divide this figure by the number of goats exposed to the supplement to determine consumption per head per day (3.33 lb/day /100 goats = 0.033 lb/hd/day). To convert this into ounces, multiply by 16 (0.033 lb/hd/day X 16 oz/lb = 0.5 oz/hd/day). In this example, each goat was consuming an average of 0.5 oz per day. As a rule of thumb for Sweetlix supplement products, adult goats should consume the free choice loose mineral supplements at an average of 0.5 oz per head per day (about 1 lb per goat per month) and should consume the 20% All Natural Goat Block at an average of 2-4 oz. per head per day of (about 3.75 to 7.5 lbs per goat per month). However, supplements made by other manufacturers may be consumed at different rates, so always consult the product label. If consumption rates are not at recommended levels, make management changes to bring them to recommended levels.

If goats are consuming too little, increase the number of mineral feeders or blocks. You might also consider changing your mineral feeding locations. For example, if blocks are inside the barn, you might want to place them out in the pasture or near the waterer instead. Check that blocks are easily accessible, for example, not pushed into a corner or under a structure. For mineral feeders, check that there are no obstructions in the feeders that will prevent mineral from flowing down to where the goats can consume it.

If goats are consistently consuming too much (after the initial 2 week acclimation period), reduce the number of mineral feeders or blocks or move them farther away from areas that goats frequent (watering, loafing and feeding areas). If repositioning of the blocks or mineral feeders does not correct the situation, remove the supplement and reevaluate your overall feeding program. Remember that supplements cannot take the place of a well balanced diet. If supplement over-consumption persists, it can be a sign of a poorly balanced overall diet.

6. Do not allow goats to run out of mineral supplement.

Inconsistent access to mineral supplements will result in poor performance. Monitor loose mineral feeders at least once a week and be sure to refill as necessary. Or when utilizing blocks, place new blocks next to the old when the old block is half-consumed. To reduce wastage, place small block pieces in a trough or feed pan.

Goats with inconsistent access to minerals will typically over consume minerals when they do have them, thus leading the goat producer to think that this behavior will continue long term and that the goats are going to “eat me out of house and home”. When this happens the producer often limit access to the minerals even more, thus continuing the cycle. However, in truth, when goats are allowed to eat as much as they want, they will typically slow down to recommended consumption levels within 2 weeks after they have had a chance to “even out” any underlying mineral imbalances or deficiencies.

7. Find the right supplement for your situation.

If after trying all of the above management tips your goats are still not consuming the recommended amounts of the mineral supplement, you may need to consider switching products. There are many different supplement products available. Some supplement product formulas and forms (block vs. loose) are more suited for certain management systems than others. Contact your local Sweetlix dealer or Sweetlix at 1-87SWEETLIX for information on the variety of goat supplement products available and advice on which supplements are best suited for which situations.

These are but a few management tips for proper free choice mineral supplementation for goats. For more information on proper mineral supplementation, contact your local Sweetlix dealer, call Sweetlix at **1-87SWEETLIX** or visit our website at www.sweetlix.com. Sweetlix offers a variety of supplement products for meat as well as dairy goats including: **16:8 Meat Maker**, **16:8 Meat Maker with Rumensin[®]**, **20% All Natural Goat Block**, **Caprine Magnum-Milk** and the **Goat Kid Milk Replacer with Deccox[®]**. To receive a free product brochure or technical information please call 1-87SWEETLIX or visit www.sweetlix.com.

Jackie Nix is an animal nutritionist with Sweetlix (<http://www.sweetlix.com>). You can contact her at jnix@sweetlix.com or 1-800-325-1486 for questions or to learn more about the Sweetlix line of mineral and protein supplements for goats, cattle, horses, sheep and wildlife.

*Rumensin is a registered trademark of Elanco Animal Health
Deccox is a registered trademark of Alparma, Inc.*

April 2004



Figure 1. A simple mineral feeder constructed of 3-in. diameter PVC pipe.



Figure 2. Photo of a goat utilizing a PVC mineral feeder. Note that the mineral feeder is raised such as to avoid fecal contamination.